

ONLINE PUBLIC RELATIONS: USE OF WEBSITE AND SOCIAL MEDIA BY STATE PSUS IN ODISHA

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ABSTRACT

Communication is a core function in public relations. Most of the definitions of Public Relations highlight the importance of Communication in Public Relations. Managing communication activities is the major responsibility of public relations practitioners. The internet has the biggest impact on Communication, both channels, and process. It has increased the efficiency, interactivity, and reach of communication (Haig, 2000). This, in turn, has also significantly influenced Public relations. Use of internet and interment enabled communication platforms has made a significant impact on communication between organizations and their various stakeholders as well as within the organization. Websites and Social Media are two integral parts of Online Public Relations used by organizations across the world.

The study aims at understanding the use of internet-enabled communication platforms by State-owned Public Sector Units in Odisha. Using Content Analysis method, the study analyses websites and social media accounts of all the 'working' PSUs of the Odisha Government. The Study finds that more than half of the State PSUs have a corporate website but their presence in social media platforms is very low. The PSUs are far behind in use of the website and social media for their communication and public relations activities. Most of the PSUs fail in including Kent and Taylor's (1998) principles of dialogic communication in their website and social media. The interactivity and two-way communication opportunity provided by websites and social media are hardly used by the PSUs.

KEYWORDS: *Communication, Public Relations, Social Media, Online PR, Odisha, Corporate Website, Public Sector Undertakings, Dialogic Principles, Press Room & Website*

Received: Jan 08, 2019; **Accepted:** Jan 28, 2019; **Published:** Feb 12, 2019; **Paper Id.:** IJCMSAPR20192

INTRODUCTION

Communication & Public Relations: An Essential Association

Communication is the core function in public relations practice. It is mean to establish and sustain a strategic relationship with the public. According to leading public relations scholar James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984), public relations is "the management of communication between an organization and its publics" (p. 6). Recently, the Public Relations Society of America (2012) presented a modern definition of Public Relations as "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics". From these definitions, it is evident that one of the major responsibilities of public relations practitioners includes planning, managing, and executing communication activities for the organization. In other words, public relations is essentially a Communication function in which two-way nature of communication is emphasized (Kitchen, 1997).

With the advent of the Internet, the way we communicate with the world around us has changed in an

unprecedented way. The same is also true about organizations and the ways in which they interact and communicate with their audiences. The internet has revolutionized communication process and exchange of information across the globe. Haig (2000) view the Internet as a communication tool that aided the distribution and dissemination of information. It has brought new avenues for making communication more effective and real-time. The power to integrate multimedia made it more attractive. Newer and faster channels of communication are emerging with the use of internet technology. The best part is that the internet keeps on improving in terms of efficiency, interactivity and reach (Haig, 2000).

Public Relation, as the practice of managing spread of information between an individual or an organization and the public, has been highly influenced by the rise of the internet and internet-enabled communication platforms. The possible impact of the internet and web was observed during the 1990s. Realizing the impact of the internet on Public Relations Communication, Brian Solis promoted the term PR 2.0 during 1995/6 (Breakenridge, 2016). Solis and Breakenridge assert that:

“PR 2.0 was born through the analysis of how the Web and multimedia were redefining PR and marketing communications, while also creating a new toolkit to reinvent how companies communicate with influencers and directly with people” (Solis and Breakenridge, 2009:30).

Breakenridge (2016) added that PR 2.0 as

“The convergence of Public Relations and the Internet with the potential to change how communications professionals reach customers and online communities with social media strategies” (Breakenridge, 2016:para.1).

Use of internet and internet enabled communication platforms has made a significant impact on communication between organizations and their various stakeholders as well as within the organization. Some of the key features of Internet-enabled communication like speed, personalization, interactivity, high reach, cost-effectiveness, efficiency, and measurability makes it much more attractive than traditional channels of communication. Public Relations professionals are using Online Public Relations tools extensively to reach out their target audience and customers. According to Philips and Yong argue that:

“Online Public Relations is not an alternative to other forms of relationship building, communication, and interaction; it is an extension of what has gone before” (Philips and Yong 2009; 125).

Public Relations in the digital era goes beyond the traditional boundaries and use the internet and new media technologies for a wider reach. In addition to traditional communication mediums, it uses digital platforms such as blogs, social media, online press release, websites etc for information exchange.

Websites and Social Media are two integral parts of Online Public Relations used by organizations across the world. In fact, a website has become an important online identity for organizations and individuals. Reddi (2014) says that:

"The website has become a major communication point between organizations and their publics and as such is of considerable importance to public relations practice" (Reddi, 2014; 448).

On a different note, Soylu (2018) avers that:

“The main purpose of corporate websites is to manage the company's reputation by communicating corporate position, brand and product as well as corporate philosophy of the company" (Soylu, 2018; 39).

A corporate website can be an important tool in online public relations by including press releases, news bulletins, press kits, press contact information etc for faster access to information for media and various other stakeholders of the organization.

On the other hand, social media has become an inevitable tool in public relations as it has empowered people to become the new influencers (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). It gives opportunities for two way communication between organization and its public, leading to greater engagement. Organizations are increasingly using social media as a tool for building a relationship with their various publics by sharing a wide range of information with a diverse group of direct and indirect stakeholders. It is used to link people to brands, people to people, people to organizations, and organizations to organizations, besides engaging with the stakeholders. It has become a new necessity for Organisations to build their credibility and brand image. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn are some of the popular social media platforms used by organizations across the world. As per 'Social Media Marketing: India Trends Study 2016' Report by Ernst & Young, 100% brands it surveyed had a Facebook presence and 96% were present in Twitter. The next most popular social media platforms are YouTube and LinkedIn (84% each). Despite the focus on social media, surprisingly, brands still rated Websites as the most effective platform for customer engagement (p. 9).

Kent and Taylor establish five principles for integration of dialogic public relations and the World Wide Web. The first principle is the creation of a dialogic loop in which publics can send their feedback or questions and the organizations would respond. Second is principle is to provide information of general value to all public. While providing the useful information the issues of hierarchy and structure should be taken care. As the third principle the website need to be attractive for repeat visits by incorporating features like updated information, changing issues, special forums, new commentaries etc. The fourth principle focuses on ease of the interface. The website should provide easy navigation, structured information, and link, faster graphics etc. Under the fifth principle, The Rule of Conservation of Visitors, the authors recommend to include only 'essential links' with clearly marked paths for visitors to return to the site. Unnecessary links outside of the website should be avoided (Kent and Taylor, 1998).

Haig believes that unlike offline public relations where gatekeepers are found in information dissemination, in online public relations that uses the internet, one can bypass the gatekeepers or intermediaries and communicate with the audience directly. He mentions various advantages for online PR which includes constant communication, instant response, global audience, Audience Knowledge, two-way communication and cost-effectiveness (Haig, 2000).

Shrivastava is of the view that corporate website has become the de facto center of communications efforts and hence Public Relations professionals should ensure that their Organisation's website effectively supports their media relations activities (Shrivastava, 2007).

Seiple argues that if an organization is not participating in social media then it is missing the opportunity to spread its message and the valuable conversation about it on social media. Viral nature of Social Media spreads conversations more quickly and easily (Seiple, 2008).

Argenti and Barnes say that traditional print and electronic media such as newspaper and television which served as a conduit of information sharing between companies and their stakeholders is mostly a one-way channel of communication. With social media and other online communication platforms, anyone is empowered to act as a journalist of sorts. They can participate in various conversations that can affect corporate reputation (Argenti and Barnes 2009).

Bhattacharjee finds that,

“In India, the use of new media by the public relations departments of the public sector establishments is ‘quite nominal’. The author further mentions that the media strategies of these organizations do not involve the use of the social media and not many messages are conveyed directly to the people through the use of social media barring a few exceptions” (Bhattacharjee, 2015;32).

Raj, Joseph & Rousseau argue that communication professionals require social media for corporate communication needs and campaigns. Campaign on social media can help in improving the image of the Company. The authors further write,

“In India, since social media is still picking up; thus, a proper mix of the traditional media along with the social media adds to the ingredients of effective corporate communication. But the messages in social media has to be attractive, clear and crisp to gain maximum momentum and reach a large number of online users” (Raj, Joseph & Rousseau, 2015;65).

Motion, Heath, and Leitch say that social media offer an opportunity for organizations to increase their communication reach. An active presence in social media can help in building customer loyalty and advocacy and at the same time can drive traffic to corporate websites (Motion, Heath, and Leitch 2016).

Chhibber in a study finds that “digital media has changed the face of Public Relations because of its popularity among the consumers and the target audience is the reason for the change because they feel that digital media is more convenient, more interactive and easily accessible medium” (Chhibber, 2018; 41).

Soylu (2018) opine that corporate websites help in building corporate image and brand value online as they enable public relations activities to reach a wider audience at an affordable cost (Soylu; 2018).

Overview of PSUS in Odisha

Public Sector Undertaking (PSU) in India refers to an enterprise owned by the Government, Central or State. It is also known as public sector enterprise. Through PSUs, the Government manages its commercial and economic activities. These Governments owned organizations play an important role in accelerating economic development of the State.

At the time of formation of Odisha as a separate State in 1936, the State had no public or private sector enterprise. So the State opted for development through productive activities (Pani & Sarangi, 2007). In 1943, the Mayurbhanj Textiles Limited and the Titagarh Tannery Limited were established as first public enterprises of Odisha. The Government has only 62% share in Mayurbhanj Textiles, whereas Titagarh Tannery was departmental enterprise (Atmanand, 1997). Post-Independence, there has been a significant rise in a number of Public Sector Undertakings in Odisha due to focus on it by different five-year plans.

State PSUs (PSUs owned by Government of Odisha) in Odisha are of two types: State Government Companies and Statutory Corporations. They carry out activities of commercial nature, with a broad objective of the public welfare. As per the Audit Report No.5 (PSUs) for the year ended March 2017 by Comptroller and Auditor General of India, there were 84 PSUs in Odisha. Out of these, 53 PSUs were working and 28 PSUs are not working as on 31 March 2017. There were only three Statutory Corporations of the State Government (p. 1).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES & QUESTIONS

Objectives

From the above literature, it is evident that websites and social media play a catalytic and strategic role in Public Relations Communication activities of organizations. However, there is hardly any literature on how these two online tools are used by public sector organizations in India. The study aims at understanding the use of internet-enabled communication platforms by State-owned Public Sector Units in Odisha. The Objectives of the study are:

- To analyze the usage of the website for public relations communication by State PSUs in Odisha.
- To examine the social media usage by State PSUs in Odisha for organizational communication and information dissemination.

Research Questions

Based on the above two objectives the present study attempts to engage with the following two questions:

RQ 1: Do the websites of Odisha State PSUs incorporate the principles of dialogic communication effectively?

RQ 2: Do the social media activities of Odisha State PSUs provide relevant information for media and stakeholders?

METHODOLOGY

Content analysis method has been used for this study. Krippendorff (2004) defines content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use” (p.18). The scholar further adds that the reference to the text given in the definition is not limited to content analysis of written material only. It can be art, images, maps, sounds, signs, symbols and even numerical records, provided they speak about phenomena outside of what can be sensed or observed. Kim & Kujlis (2010) conclude that content analysis can be employed on web data generated on social networking sites to determine social and communicational trends and patterns as well as user’s attitudes, preferences, and behaviors.

All the 56 working PSUs listed in the Audit Report No.5 (PSUs) by Comptroller and Auditor General of India has been taken for the study. A coding scheme was prepared to incorporating Kent and Taylor’s (1998) principles of dialogic communication on their websites. Additional items like nature of the text, images, message, tallies of a number of friends or followers etc were included in the coding scheme. Only home page, contact page/section and press room/media section of the website of the PSUs under study were considered. Similarly, official profile/page in popular social media sites which includes Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube were included for the study. The information as per the coding scheme was entered separately for each PSUs. Data obtained were grouped for analysis, using statistical methods. The study has been made during January 2019. The domain name age has been confirmed through domain information available through www.whois.com search. In the case of Facebook, only official Facebook page was considered. If the page is not available Facebook account as linked to its official website were considered. Facebook posts of during the month of November and December 2018 were considered for the study.

Key Findings

As per the Audit Report No.5 (PSUs) for the year ended March 2017 by Comptroller and Auditor General of India, Odisha Government has total 56 Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs). Out of them 53 PSUs are Government Companies and three are Statutory Corporations. Manufacturing and Infrastructure sector have 11 PSUs each. These two sectors are followed by Service Sector with 10 PSUs. Power Sector has Eight Companies, Agriculture & Allied Sector has seven Companies and Financing Sector has Six Companies.

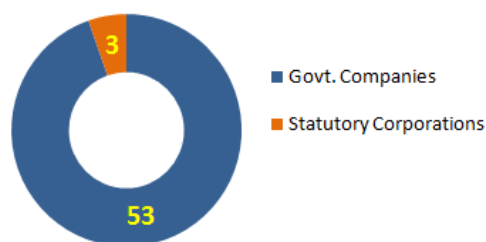


Figure 1

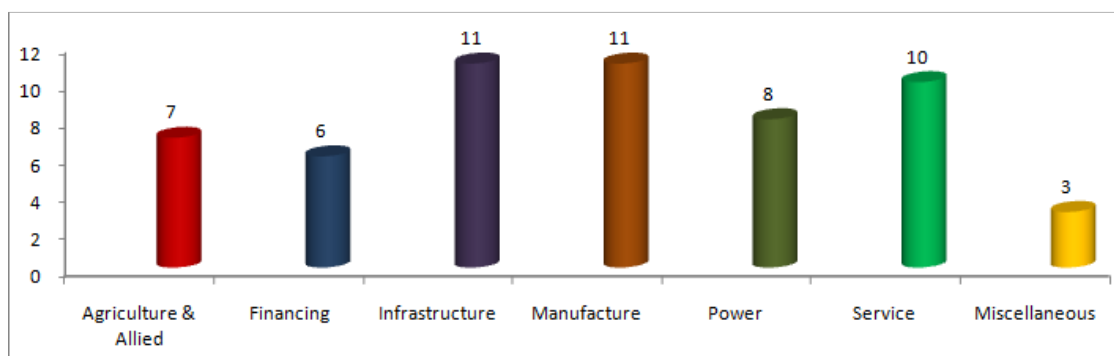


Figure 2

Annual Turnover

Out of the total PSUs, 15 (27% per cent) companies have zero annual turnovers. Similarly, seven (12 per cent) companies have a turnover between Rs. 11 Crore to Rs.50 Crore. Six Companies have turned over less than Rs. 1 Crore and an equal number of companies have turned over between Rs. 1 Crore to Rs. 10 Crore. Only Four Companies have turned over above Rs. 1000 Crore. The Report contains no information about the annual turnover of three companies.

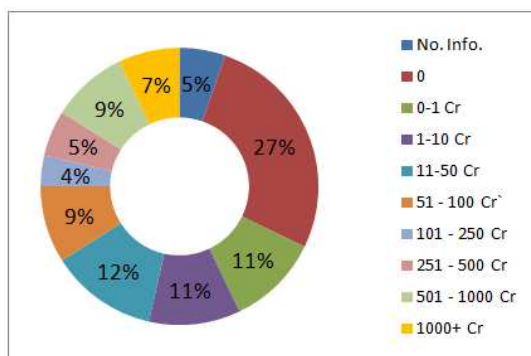


Figure 3

Online Presence

It has been found that more than half of the State PSUs (58.9 per cent) have a corporate website, whereas their presence in of the leading social media platform is low. Only 26.8 per cent (15) PSUs have an official Facebook presence, 23.2 per cent (13) PSUs have a presence in twitter. LinkedIn and YouTube have an official presence of very few state PSUs (only 7.1 per cent each).

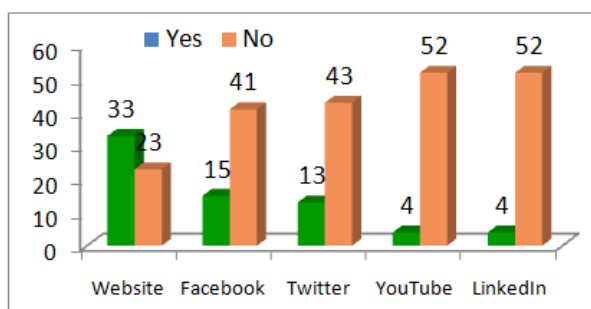


Figure 4

All the Companies having annual turnover more than Rs. 100 Crore are having their own website. Only two companies, out of 15 Companies whose turnover is Zero, have a website.

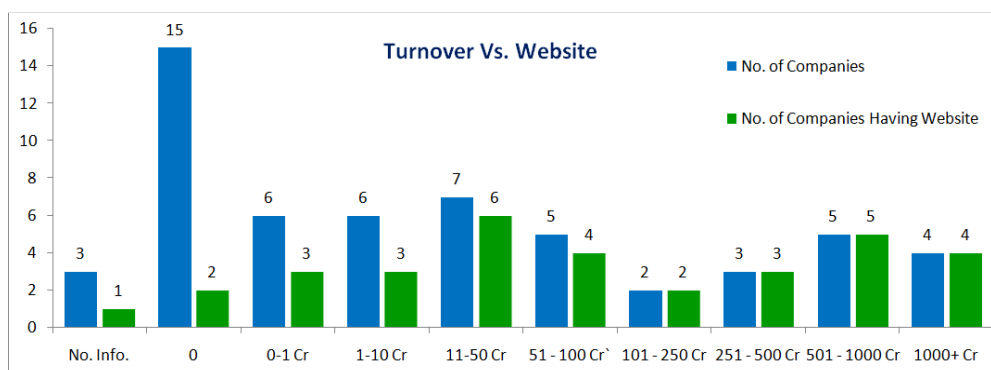


Figure 5

Out of the 33 PSUs having websites, domain age of eight PSUs is between 10 to 15 years and that of seven PSU Websites are 1 to 5 years old. Domain names of six websites are of 5 to 10 years old and the same number of domains are between 15-20 years. Only one PSU's website domain name is less than one year old. For five websites, no information regarding the domain age could be obtained.

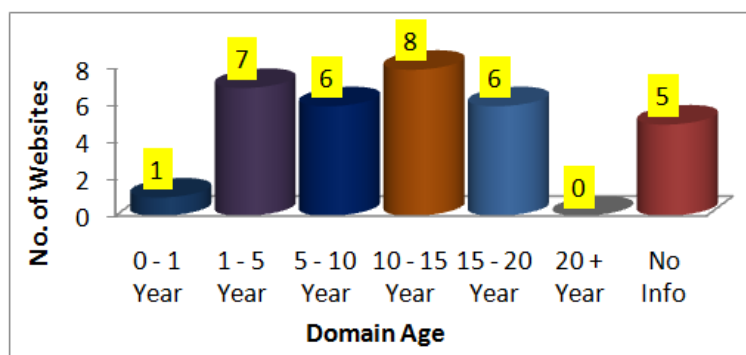


Figure 6

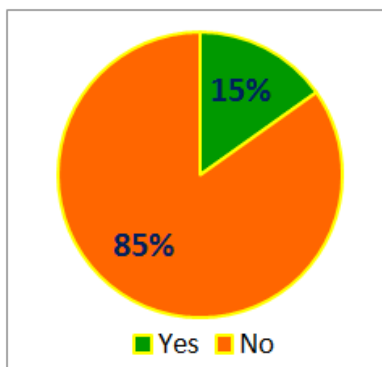


Figure 7

It has been observed that most of the State PSUs in Odisha are not using website effectively for online media relation purpose. Only 5 (15 per cent) of the PSUs having their own website have separate media tab or online press room section. However, none of the PSUs have posted any latest press release or news for media in this section or in any other section. None of the PSUs having a website also give contact details of their Public Relations Department or Person in Charge of their Public Relations. Journalists, if ever have any query can get in touch with the PSUs through the general number and/or email given in the contact section of the website. All the websites have given a phone number and/or email under the contact section.

Out of the 33 PSUs having websites, 19 PSUs have not given any social media widgets on their websites. Facebook and Twitter have been found to be the most preferred social media widget given in the PSU websites. Total 14 PSUs have given both Facebook and Twitter widgets / links, whereas two PSUs have given links to their LinkedIn account. Three PSUs have YouTube widget, two PSUs have Instagram widget and one PSU have a Pinterest widget, in addition to Facebook and Twitter widgets.

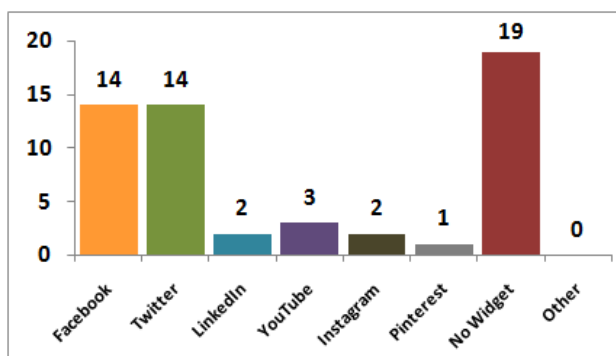


Figure 8

Websites of only two PSUs have a newsletter and ten PSUs have given search facility on their websites. Similarly, only Eight PSUs have given visible site map in their websites.

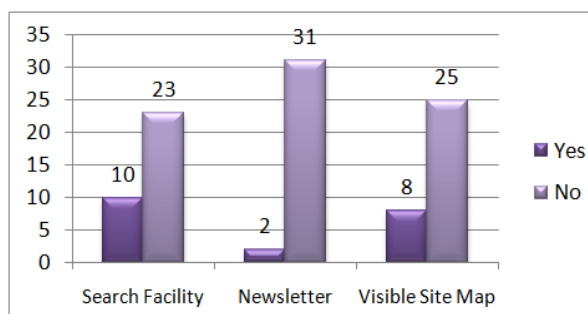


Figure 9

More than half of the PSUs, who have a website, have neither had a photo gallery or a video gallery. Out of the 33 State PSUs, 16 PSUs have given photo galleries, whereas only four PSUs have video galleries on their websites. During content analysis, it was also observed that photo galleries in most of the PSU Websites are not updated regularly.

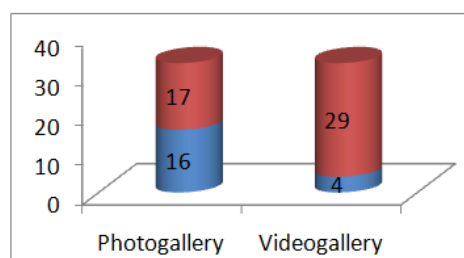


Figure 10

Twitter Activity

It has been observed that most of the PSUs, who have twitter accounts, active on twitter for less than two years old. Out of 13 PSUs having a presence in Twitter, Six PSUs joined Twitter during last 12 to 18 months, whereas twitter account of four PSUs is 18 to 24 months old. Only three PSU have twitter accounts, which are more than 2 years old.

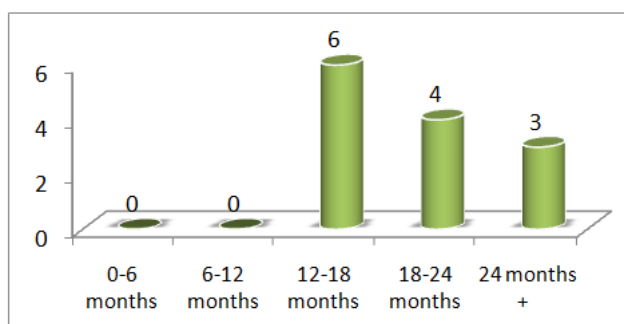


Figure 11

Almost of half (46.15 per cent) of the PSUs having twitter account have total tweets less than 100. Only one PSU have total tweets more than 1000.

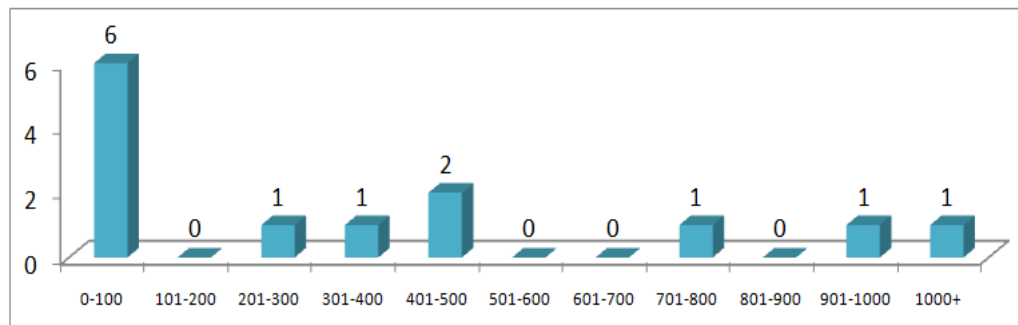


Figure 12

During the last two months (November and December 2018) Five PSUs, out of 13 PSUs having a twitter account, have never posted anything in their twitter account. Only One PSU has posted more than 100 tweets in their profile, while the number of tweets posted by two PSUs is between 76 to 100.

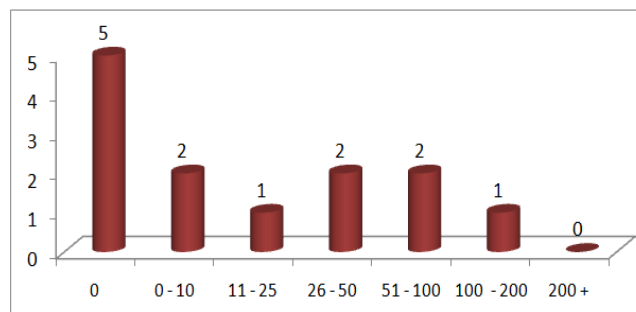


Figure 13

In terms of followings, total seven PSUs have more than 1000 followers and four companies are less than 100 followers. Follower's number of two PSUs ranges between 101 to 999. On the other hand only two PSUs have ever replied to others on their twitter page.

Facebook Activities

As mentioned above, out of 56 PSUs, 41 PSUs (72.2 per cent) have no Facebook presence. Out of 15 companies having a Facebook presence, 13 have a Facebook page and two PSUs have a Facebook user account.

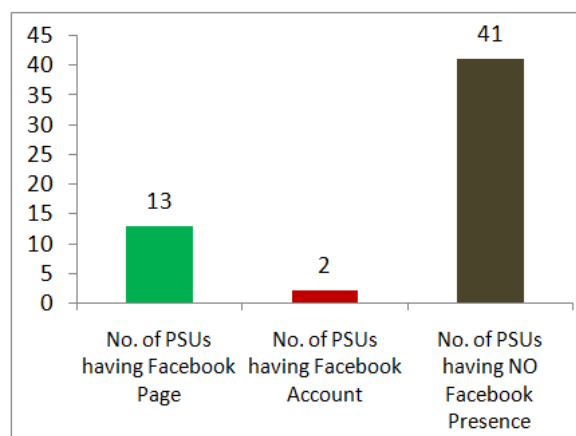


Figure 14

Facebook presence of most of the PSUs is more than one year old. Out of the 15 PSUs, Facebook Pages of Six PSUs are more than two years old and Facebook page / account of four PSUs are 18 to 24 months. Similarly, Four PSUs joined Facebook within the last 12 to 18 months, whereas only one PSU created its Facebook Page during the last six to 12 months.

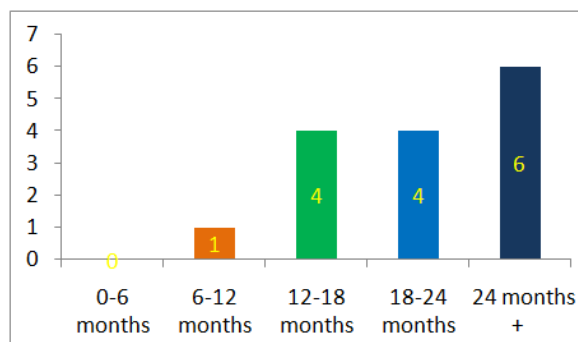


Figure 15

In terms of Followers, Five PSUs have more than 1000 followers on their Facebook page, while three PSUs have less than 100 followers. A number of followers for two PSUs is in the range of 201-300 and the same number of PSUs has 901 to 1000 followers. Number of Companies having followers / friends in the range of 301 to 400, 401 to 500 and 701 to 800 is one each.

Out of 15 State PSUs having a Facebook presence, Seven PSUs have not posted anything on Facebook during the last two months, whereas Eight PSUs have posted less than 100 Posts during the same period. Like Twitter, only two PSUs have ever replied to others on their Facebook page.

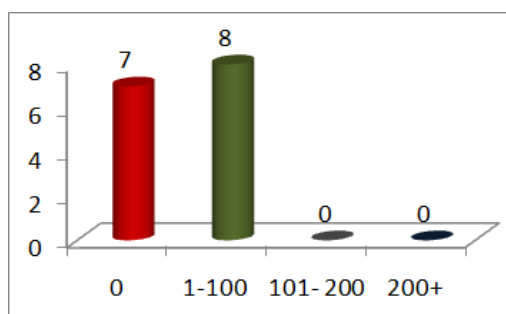


Figure 16

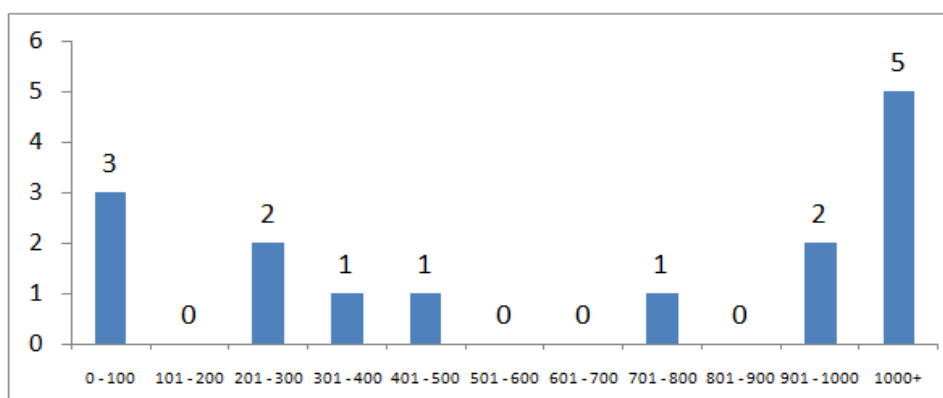


Figure 17

YouTube & LinkedIn

Only 7 per cent (4 Nos) State PSUs have an official presence in YouTube and same is in LinkedIn. In YouTube, The videos posted by three PSUs are more than six months old. None of the PSUs having LinkedIn pages have posted anything in this social networking site during the last two months.

DISCUSSIONS

From the data, it is found that most of the Odisha State PSUs are still far behind ineffective use of the website and social media for their communication and public relations purposes. During the content analysis, it was found that most of the websites by State PSUs are not updated regularly and are not visually very attractive. They fail in including Kent and Taylor's (1998) principles of dialogic communication in their website and social media. This Answers the First Research Question.

It is also observed that the State PSUs, who have a social media presence, are mostly engaged in one way communication over their profile page. They only post their content whatever they want and hardly respond to the relevant query or suggestions. The interactive features of social media are not used properly. Content in Facebook and Twitter of PSUs, who have a presence in both these platforms, are almost the same or similar in nature. This Answers the Second Research Question.

CONCLUSIONS

Public Relations are also an art, taking the kind of activities that it encompasses for the better image building of the organization. In the end, Public Relations is all about maintaining a cordial, efficient and long-lasting relation with both the internal as well as the external public. At the same time, Public Relations is not just an activity by itself rather it takes good communication, coordination, liaison, planning, and management into consideration to deliver a positive outcome.

Importantly, in contemporary times of internet and new media, it is super-evident and essential that the organization needs to have a strong and quite an efficient Public Relations team to safeguard and strengthen the organization's image both offline and online. And to attain that very objective, it is very much needed that the Public Relations department needs to equip with the necessary skill sets that are required to have a strong and appealing presence in the online world. Incidentally, online media platforms like Webpage, Facebook, and Twitter are quite universal and diverse in its reach; hence having an active presence in these platforms like the earlier mentioned ones would make a positive change to the online image of the organization.

From the particular research concerned here, it is being concluded that the PSUs in the Odisha is way behind when it comes to the online public relations. And that needs to be addressed at a very prompt basis with an efficient mechanism. That will address a whole lot of issues related to internal and external communication gap and crisis. The Public Relations department needs to be more cognizant of the fact that the public that are associated with the organization are evolving with the changing sphere in and around them. Hence, it is quite expected that the Public Relations department needs to be updated and prompt enough to meet the demands of the changing time.

LIMITATIONS

The Study has several limitations which include:

- It covers ‘what’ aspects of social media and website activities. it does not explore into ‘why’ aspect
- The Study does not differentiate the PSUs as per their nature of the business. There were some special purpose vehicles as well as non-profit companies among the PSUs studies.

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